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ABSTRACT

This article examines the listening process and factors affecting listening. It also suggests general guidelines for teaching and assessing listening and gives examples of activities for practicing and developing listening skills for the workplace. Listening is a demanding process that involves the listener, speaker, message content, and accompanying visual support. Listening is an active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues. Many events constitute listening (e.g., the listener determines a reason for listening, takes raw speech and deposits an image of it in short-term memory, recalls background information to interpret the message, assigns a meaning to the message, and checks that the message has been understood). Teaching workplace listening skills requires activating background knowledge and vocabulary. Pre-listening activities set the stage and review what the learner already knows. Post-listening activities help the learner assess success or failure in carrying out the listening task. Lessons focused on listening may be enhanced by incorporating several principles (e.g., materials should be authentic, and listening tasks should be relevant). The paper lists seven classroom listening activities appropriate for the workplace. They involve doing, choosing, duplicating, answering, condensing, extending, and transferring. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education) (SM)

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Listening Skills in the Workplace

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Listening is perhaps the most critical element in language and language learning, for it is the key to speaking, and beyond that, reading and writing. Particularly in the workplace, listening is used at least three times as much as speaking, and four to five times as much as reading and writing. At all levels --- from entry level to managerial --- listening is perceived as crucial for communication. Yet listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning.

In this article, we will try to summarize what is known about the listening process including the factors affecting listening. We also suggest general guidelines for teaching and assessing listening, and give examples of activities for practicing and developing listening skills for the workplace.

The Listening Process

Listening is a demanding process involving: 1) the listener; 2) the speaker; 3) the content of the message; and 4) any accompanying visual support.

Imagine a workplace message being transmitted between listener and speaker using tools (a hammer, towels, a fax machine, etc.) or a video, as opposed to a message left on a telephone without visual support by an unidentified speaker. ("Put the xxx in the xxx tomorrow.") The message may be the same in both situations, but it is perceived in very different ways. Let's examine each component of the process.

1. The Listener. If the listener is familiar with or is interested in the topic, comprehension will increase. If not, a listener may struggle and then tune out the message. Also, a listener who is an active participant in a conversation, even though he has little background knowledge to facilitate understanding, is more likely to learn from the encounter. That means that the workplace facilitator/teacher has to explicitly teach active listening skills such as repetition, definition of points not understood, and clarification and negotiation, to enable the listener to make sense of the incoming information. These are as much listening as speaking skills.
2. The Speaker. When we speak, we usually do not speak in full sentences. Colloquial language and reduced forms also make comprehension more difficult. A speaker's rate of delivery may be too fast, too slow, or may have many hesitations for a listener to follow. All of these may affect concentration. Awareness of a speaker's corrections and use of rephrasing (er..., I mean... that is...) can enable the listener to recognize speech habits as clues to deciphering meaning. While teachers cannot predict how each speaker will use language, they can teach students to listen for patterns in speech and to use strategies which help them comprehend, e.g., asking a speaker to slow down, or to repeat.
3. The Content. Content that is familiar is easier to comprehend than content that is unfamiliar. In the workplace, this becomes a bigger advantage when employees are listening and talking about their work. Hotel housekeepers, factory workers, or office clerks usually talk about topics that are familiar. The contents may be unfamiliar only when explaining a new machine or process. When background knowledge is essential to

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understanding content, more listening strategies may be necessary.
4. Visual Support. Visual support, e.g., the actual tool, a video, pictures, diagrams, gestures, facial expressions, and body language, increases comprehension. However, how to use these strategies may need to be explicitly taught so the learner is able to interpret them correctly.

Active listening

While the listener, the speaker, the content, and visuals are all part of the listening process, what happens in the brain to comprehend the message is key. Most of what we know comes from research into native language development. Although once labeled a "passive" process, listening is very much an "active" process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues. Research does tell us that there are a number of events that constitute "listening". The listener:

- determines a reason for listening;
- takes the raw speech and deposits an image of it in short-term memory;
attempts to organize the information by identifying the type of speech event (inform, request, persuade);
- sometimes predicts information expected to be included in the message;
- recalls background information to interpret the message;
- assigns a meaning to the message;
- checks that the message has been understood;
- transfers the original message into long-term memory; and
- deletes the original information from short-term memory.

Although we do not know in what order or how this occurs--indeed the listener is seldom even aware of performing these steps-- it is a guide for the teacher of the steps that take place when a message is perceived.

Teaching And Assessing Listening

To teach listening skills in the workplace, activating background knowledge and vocabulary is primary. Pre-listening activities set the stage and review what the learner already knows about a subject. For example, a new type of floor polisher is being introduced in the workplace. Activities that review what the learner already knows about using the old floor polisher stimulate thinking about the new one. This might entail reviewing vocabulary such as switch on or off, brushes, or backwards and forwards, discussing steps in the polishing process, or generating a list of questions from the learner. During the pre-listening activities, the learner recalls from long-term memory what he knows about floor polishers. The learner is then ready to do the listening task itself. The task should involve the listener in getting information that is new and immediately doing something with it, e.g., "The polisher switch is on the bottom. Turn it on." The listener then turns on the switch. Post-listening activities help the learner to assess success or failure in carrying out the listening task, to build upon his background knowledge, and to integrate listening with other language skills. To continue with our floor polisher example, have the listener reiterate sequencing tasks (first, second, next) or practice "if/then" questions or statements (if the switch is broken, then...). In another example, a hotel worksite where schedule changes are announced frequently at team meetings, learners may need practice recognizing details such as names, times, and dates within a longer stream of speech. In this case, a posted weekly calendar or an audiotape might be useful as post-listening activities.

Guidelines for Teaching Listening

Lessons focused on listening will be enhanced by incorporating the following guiding principles. Materials should be authentic. You would not use a pillow to demonstrate tensile strength in a factory, nor would you use a hammer to demonstrate softness in a motel room. As authenticity should be evident in task, so should it be in

language. The language should reflect real discourse, including hesitations, rephrasing, and a variety of accents. Listeners at work all need to be aware that interaction between co-workers and managers may be different than interactions among co-workers, in terms of formality, vocabulary and topics. Language needs to be comprehensible, but it does not need to be constantly modified or simplified to make it easier for the listener. A guest in a hotel or customer in a restaurant is not an ESL teacher; ultimately, the worker must communicate successfully with the client, not the instructor.

Level of difficulty can be controlled by the selection of the task. At the beginning level, in a unit on listening for directions, learners might hear "May I borrow your hammer?" (or detergent, or tray). Then they choose the correct item. At an intermediate level, the learner might hear a series of instructions ("Go to the broom closet, get the new floor polisher, take it to the hall in front of classroom 301, polish the floor there, then go to the cafeteria..."). The learner then draws a map of the worksite and directions. An advanced level learner might listen to an audiotape of an actual workplace meeting and write a summary of instructions that the supervisor gave the team. This use of authentic material as a teaching tool not only represents the familiarity of the working environment, but increases transferability to listening outside of the workplace context in the community. Sources of authentic material can include the examples above, as well as workplace training videos, audiotapes of actual workplace exchanges, TV and radio broadcasts about the industry.

Using authentic materials is a good way to develop listening strategies. Predicting, asking for clarification, using non-verbal cues are examples of strategies that increase chances for successful listening. For example, using a training video segment--- with the sound off--- of the new floor polisher or a workplace team meeting would give listeners a chance to predict what was happening by answering questions about the setting, action, and interaction. Viewing the segment again with the sound on allows employees to confirm or modify their hypothesis. It also gives them a chance to check for accuracy in hearing sounds, intonation, words, and grammatical structures. These strategies for listening go far beyond the workplace.

Most of all, listening should be relevant. To keep motivation high, listeners must have a purpose for listening. (In eavesdropping, how often do we listen intently for details when the conversation is of interest to us, and how often do we tune out when it is not?) If learners at the workplace need to be able to understand new policies and procedures at staff meetings, then classroom practice can help to develop the abilities to identify main ideas and supporting details, to identify cause and effect, to indicate comprehension or lack of, and certainly to ask for clarification.

Classroom listening activities

So, what kind of listening activities are appropriate for the workplace class? The following seven different tasks can be used to teach, as well as test for success.

1.Doing: the listener responds physically to the stimulus, such as "open the door" or "stand up" or "write your name". (This is often called Total Physical Response.) There are many variants: sometimes the learner repeats what is said, then does it; sometimes he or she responds to directions of three or four steps.

2. Choosing: the listener selects from alternatives such as pictures, objects, texts or actions, and demonstrates comprehension by pointing, showing, or speaking.

3. Duplicating: the listener repeats the message. A variant of this is the telephone chain, during which a message is whispered to one person, who whispers it to the next person, and so on.

4. Answering: the listener answers the question posed or participates in a face-to-face conversation.

5. Condensing: the listener takes written notes or makes an outline.

6. Extending: the listener verbally continues a story or solves a problem.

7. Transferring: the listener applies the message given orally to a diagram, or a route map, or a chart .

Materials

Teachers in the workplace have the advantage of being able to build activities around actual workplace tasks. Authentic Worksite tasks and vocabulary can be substituted in any textbook exercise written for the workplace to make it relevant for the learner. Teachers in a workplace preparation class, where students are not yet employed, have a harder task. Making listening relevant is sometimes a challenge. A good workplace-oriented text should be helpful in guiding all-around practice. In either situation, teachers will spend time on preparation. No workplace-oriented textbook will always be relevant to all student needs. Teachers need to listen to their students' needs, and be guided by them.

Because of the critical role that listening plays in the acquisition of language, improving listening skills is a challenge that demands both the teacher's and the learner's attention. Knowledge of the listening process and the factors that affect listening enable teachers to select or create listening activities that meet the needs of their learners. These listening activities must then be woven together with speaking, reading and writing activities to create a balance that mirrors the real world of both the workplace and community.

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